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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: ELECTIONS PEACEFUL AND WELL-RUN, VMRO TAKES
COMMANDING LEAD

Ref A: Skopje 49

Ref B: Skopje 74

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Ref D: Skopje 124

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Macedonia held peaceful presidential and municipal elections March 22 with few irregularities. Ruling VMRO presidential candidate George Ivanov looks set to cruise to an easy victory in the second round, to be held April 5. VMRO and its ethnic-Albanian coalition partner DUI made gains in local elections.

Closely watched mayoral runoffs remain in Tetovo, Gostivar, Struga, Ohrid, Skopje, and a number of other municipalities. The VMRO government will likely emerge April 5 with an even firmer grip on power, but will also have no excuses for not doing what it takes to join NATO and the EU. End summary.

So Far, So Good

¶2. (U) 57% of eligible voters went to the polls March 22 in the first round of presidential and nationwide municipal elections. The election was a significant improvement over parliamentary elections in 2008, which were marred by intimidation, violence, and significant irregularities. This time there was no violence and the atmosphere was calm and peaceful in all parts of the country. International, domestic, and party observers as well as election officials all reported a good atmosphere during the campaign and on election day.

¶3. (U) The elections were generally well-run, despite logistical challenges of jointly administering presidential and municipal elections for the first time as well as the extra challenge of a heavy snowstorm March 20 and 21 that made it difficult to deliver ballots and other required materials. While the storm prevented 134 polling stations from opening, this amounted to only 4% of polling stations and less than 1% of eligible voters.

¶4. (SBU) OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Election Observation Mission (ODIHR EOM) gave a positive preliminary assessment on March 23, though its report cited instances of family and group voting and repeated ODIHR's concerns about intimidation (chiefly by the ruling VMRO, though it did not say this directly) of civil servants to support VMRO candidates and to deliver even more votes to them. Nevertheless, EOM Head of Mission Peter Eicher (former U.S. FSO) called these elections a "major step forward." The biggest losers in the election, opposition parties SDSM and DPA, complained that while the voting was generally free and fair, intimidation and control of the institutions gave an unfair advantage to VMRO and its e-Albanian coalition partner, DUI.

¶5. (U) Embassy and other international and domestic observers reported virtually none of the major problems from last year: gunfights, clear intimidation in polling stations by party "observers" and activists, menacing gatherings of young men just outside polling stations, ballot-stuffing, etc. The GoM deployed

significant police presence, especially in the predominantly e-Albanian municipalities. While many units were from other areas, they were also mixed ethnically. The police were calm and professional. Most e-Albanians seemed relatively unconcerned with the police presence or even welcomed it. We were present in only one polling station where a party observer (from DPA) objected to the police, but he was far more sanguine when we checked into the same polling station some hours later.

Some Problems Persist

¶16. (SBU) A number of our monitors as well as ODIHR's witnessed a troubling trend of "assisted voting" clearly organized by the political parties. Party activists would lead groups of "illiterate" or elderly voters into polling stations and "assist" them in marking their ballots. Election officials rarely challenged this, even though the rules state that any one person can only assist a maximum of two others to vote. We will raise this issue with the parties and election officials. ODIHR officials told us privately that while this is disturbing, it will not likely lead to a "failing grade" in its final assessment. It will, however, almost certainly be an issue ODIHR will raise prominently in its report. Nevertheless, all observers credit the authorities here for running a much smoother process than last time. In 2008, parties and others, including the U.S. Embassy, filed hundreds of formal complaints with the State Election Commission which resulted in re-runs in 196 polling stations. For the first round this year, only 65 complaints were filed; we anticipate few if any re-runs this time.

Ivanov: Ready or Not...

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¶17. (U) George Ivanov, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE's candidate (ref a), appears poised to claim an easy victory in the second round, scheduled for April 5. Ivanov trounced the field, garnering 34% of the nearly one million votes cast. His nearest rival and second-round opponent, Ljubomir Frckoski, claimed 20%. New Democracy party chief Imer Selmani essentially tied for third with former VMRO Interior Minister (and ICTY-indictee, since acquitted) Ljube Boskovski, both winning about 14% of the vote. SDSM Secretary-General Igor Ivanovski hypothesized to us March 25 that every vote for another candidate was a vote against Ivanov, thus Frckoski has a chance in the second round. We believe it is unlikely that Frckoski will pick up enough new votes to prevail.

¶18. (U) All that can stop Ivanov, it appears, is if the second round fails to meet the 40% threshold requirement; the threshold can be daunting due to the bloated voter list, with 1.8 million voters (Macedonia's population is less than 2.1 million). There is concern that Macedonia's e-Albanian population, which comprises at least 25% of the population, is uninspired by either candidate and may stay home, thus making it harder to reach the threshold. VMRO will likely press DUI to deliver e-Albanian votes to Ivanov, but this will be a tough sell.

The Selmani Effect?

¶19. (SBU) Estimates vary, but Selmani likely garnered the votes of at least 50,000 ethnic Macedonians, a first for any e-Albanian candidate. He worked hard to win the trust of e-Macedonians, posting campaign signs in the Macedonian language in selected areas and holding well-attended rallies in cities like Stip and Strumica, where few e-Albanians reside. He also speaks fluent, educated Macedonian. Many politicians, including President Crvenkovski in a March 24 conversation with the Ambassador, noted the significance of Selmani's achievement and suggested this could be the beginning of a new dynamic in Macedonian politics.

Local Elections: VMRO and DUI Dominate

¶10. (U) VMRO was a big winner in local elections as well, winning 24 of Macedonia's 85 municipalities outright, and taking a commanding lead in many more. SDSM did manage to hang onto their strongholds in Strumica and Kumanovo, but overall had considerably weaker results in its heartland in the south and east. After the second round, a number of eastern cities may be led by VMRO mayors for the first time since Macedonian independence.

¶11. (U) In Macedonia's predominantly e-Albanian areas, DUI generally dominated, winning five municipalities outright and taking a strong lead in many others. Selmani's New Democracy party did not fare well and will likely win no municipalities, yet ND MP Suleiman Rushiti told us he is still optimistic in Aracinovo and Lipkovo. The major battles in the second round will be in Tetovo, a dead heat between DUI and DPA, and perhaps in Gostivar, where independent and former mayor Rifi Osmani took a commanding first-round lead over DUI incumbent mayor Nevzat Bejta but could not quite reach the 50% needed to wrap it up. Rushiti told us that Osmani - his cousin - is concerned since he has spent his entire war chest and has nothing left for between-round campaigning.

¶12. (SBU) Osmani should win in Gostivar easily on April 5, but the personal animosity between him and Bejta as well as DUI leader Ali Ahmeti's own concern that Osmani will also seek to overtake him as Macedonia's leading e-Albanian politician could tempt DUI to seek to "win" by other means: intimidation and major ballot-stuffing. We intend to monitor Tetovo and Gostivar very closely, and expect ODIHR to do the same. Ambassador Reeker will also visit Gostivar, Tetovo, Ohrid, and Struga to meet the mayoral candidates, just as he did before the first round.

¶13. (U) Struga, a municipality of mixed ethnicity on Lake Ohrid, will also likely be a close contest between DUI incumbent Ramiz Merko and wealthy Torbeshi (Muslim of Macedonian ethnicity) Fijat Canoski. The municipality of Ohrid is also a close race between SDSM incumbent Aleksander Petreski and VMRO candidate Kiril Trendafilov-Nance. Ohrid is a popular regional tourist destination and summer holiday spot and to many the "Jerusalem" of Macedonian Orthodoxy; VMRO would dearly love to take it back.

Comment: No More Excuses

¶14. (SBU) Should GoM authorities be able to pull off another peaceful round of elections on April 5 with minimal irregularities, this will largely remove the shadow of the 2008 debacle and, frankly, give Greece and other critics less ammunition to aim at Macedonia. But the election results will also mean a further consolidation of power by Gruevski and VMRO. With no elections

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scheduled until 2012, he and his party will be more or less free to do as they wish. On the other hand, they will shoulder an even greater share of responsibility for Macedonia's progress, and there will no longer be any excuse for not pursuing an agreement with Greece on the name issue and the key reforms necessary for EU accession. VMRO's true agenda will be evident within months.

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